

A year ago this month of the Walter Reed scandal that brought to light some of the real conditions that our brave men and women were forced to endure when returning home. Walter Reed Army Medical Center, once the crown-jewel of military medicine, has become a bleak and frustrating place for our wounded soldiers to recover, and what the Army intends to do to restore the integrity of its medical system.

The story painted a picture of repugnant living conditions and a bureaucratic nightmare for our wounded soldiers. As the Washington Post reported on the story, it described in detail the mold problems, rodent infestation, and crumbling ceilings and facades in Building 18. And as if the conditions were not repulsive enough, wounded soldiers and their families were forced to deal with an Army bureaucracy that was not equipped to provide the necessary care. Wounded soldiers are often left on their own to make and keep appointments, and fill out the 22 documents needed to enter and exit the Army's medical system.

Like millions across the country, I read this revelation in horror and disgust. It is deeply troubling to think that veterans and their families who have sacrificed so much were being left largely alone to struggle with injuries without the care and attention they need.

Supporting our troops begins with giving them a mission that makes sense and that doesn't needlessly jeopardize their lives. It ends with an unconditional commitment to men and women who have made sacrifices few of us can fully appreciate. If this Administration is going to order soldiers into battle, then it has no right to stand on the sidelines when they come home. We need a serious evaluation of the care being given to our veterans, and must immediately address holes and gaps in a system that can't afford either.

Critics of the President's escalation of the war are told that they can't both support the troops and oppose their mission. I think that you can't support the troops if you send them into battle without proper armor, or deny them critical medical care and counseling after they are injured. That is the definition of hypocrisy, and our wounded soldiers are paying the price.

Without the service of our men and women in uniform, past and present, our country would not stand so boldly, shine so brightly and live so freely.

The funding for the new construction was made possible by a \$397 million increase over the President's request for VA minor construction

In 2007, the new Congress increased health care and benefits funding for veterans by \$11.8 billion, which was \$5.5 billion more than requested by the president. This is the largest funding increase in the 77-year history of the Veterans Administration and a larger increase than the combined total of the six previous years in Congress.

Our veterans have earned every dime of this funding.

For 5.8 million veterans in the VA health care system, it will mean better care, more doctors and shorter waiting lines for medical appointments.

For the 400,000 veterans backlogged in the VA claims processing system, it will mean 3,100 new claims processors to reduce the unconscionable six-month delay for those waiting to receive their earned benefits.

For Iraq and Afghan war veterans, it will mean everyone coming into the VA system will be screened for post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.

For the most severely wounded vets, it will mean modernized polytrauma centers and a new polytrauma center in San Antonio, the first of its kind anywhere in the Southwestern United States.

For veterans from all wars with mental health issues, it will mean a minimum of \$2.9 billion dedicated to better mental health care services, a \$700 million increase over last year.

For veterans in rural areas far from VA hospitals, it will mean more VA clinics closer to home, and for the first time since 1979, when gasoline prices were 95 cents per gallon, VA travel reimbursement is increasing from 11 cents to 28.5 cents per mile.

For all Americans who never want to see one veteran living in the squalid conditions Army soldiers were subjected to at Walter Reed Annex 18 last year, it will mean nearly \$1.5 billion in new funding to do preventive construction maintenance at our VA hospitals and clinics.

For thousands of homeless veterans, increasing the homeless program by \$23 million will mean the dignity of a roof over their heads and hope for the future.

In just 12 months, the new Congress has come a long way in keeping our promises to those who have kept their promise to serve our nation, but we should do more. In the weeks, months and years ahead, let us all work together to thank our veterans with our words and our deeds. They deserve no less.

We must therefore do all we can to make certain that they receive the care and benefits that they have deserve and have earned. As increasing numbers of veterans return from battlefield deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, we know that this urgency will only increase.

Congress is on course to enact a veterans' spending bill that provides the largest increase in veterans' health care in our nation's history. We have provided \$6.6 billion more than last years funding for the Veterans Administration, and \$3.7 billion more than the President's budget request. Over \$37 billion will fund veterans' health care to treat 5.8 million patients, including over 263,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

As these service members return home from their missions, this Congress is committed to amply funding research into and care for conditions such as traumatic brain injuries and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Too many of our veterans are suffering from PTSD and traumatic brain injuries and need better care to move on with their lives after experiencing the horrors of a war zone.

In addition to increased health care funding, Congress passed the Veterans Outreach Improvement Act, which allows the Veterans Administration to partner with state and local governments to reach out to veterans and their families and ensure that they receive their veterans' benefits. Additionally, we in the House recently voted to help end the Disabled

Veterans Tax which forced disabled military retirees to give up one dollar of their pensions for every dollar of disability they receive.

Unfortunately, there are currently over 400,000 veterans waiting for their earned benefits. To help remedy this dreadful problem, we have allocated nearly \$125 million to provide 1,800 new claims processors to address this huge benefit claims backlog and to also prepare for the influx of our returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan.

There are over 24 million veterans in America. This Congress and the Democratic Leadership is committed to ensuring that American's veterans receive the respect and recognition they deserve every single day.

If you don't live near a VA hospital or clinic, then call someone you know who has served in uniform and thank them for their service. If you're traveling through an airport and see a young serviceman or woman departing for training or for combat, walk a few steps and let these veterans of tomorrow know you are grateful for their service to country. A few steps and a few words can go a long way.

For those of us in Congress, I believe it is vital that we support our hospitalized veterans and all veterans not just with our speeches but with our budgets. It's not good enough for elected representatives to honor our veterans with speeches on Veterans Day while dishonoring them with inadequate budgets all other days.

At long last, it's a new day for America's veterans. After years of VA budgets that barely, if at all, kept up with inflation, the new Congress has kept its promise to honor veterans with meaningful budget increases.

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So, what does this new funding mean for individual veterans?

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For the 400,000 veterans backlogged in the VA claims processing system, it will mean 3,100 new claims processors to reduce the unconscionable 6-month delay for those waiting to receive their earned benefits.

For Iraq and Afghan war veterans, it will mean everyone coming into the VA system will be tested for PTSD and the non visible forms of traumatic brain injury.

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